

ETOA MUNDA WON THE BATTLE

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A Story About Tribal Life

Mahasveta Devi

Translator

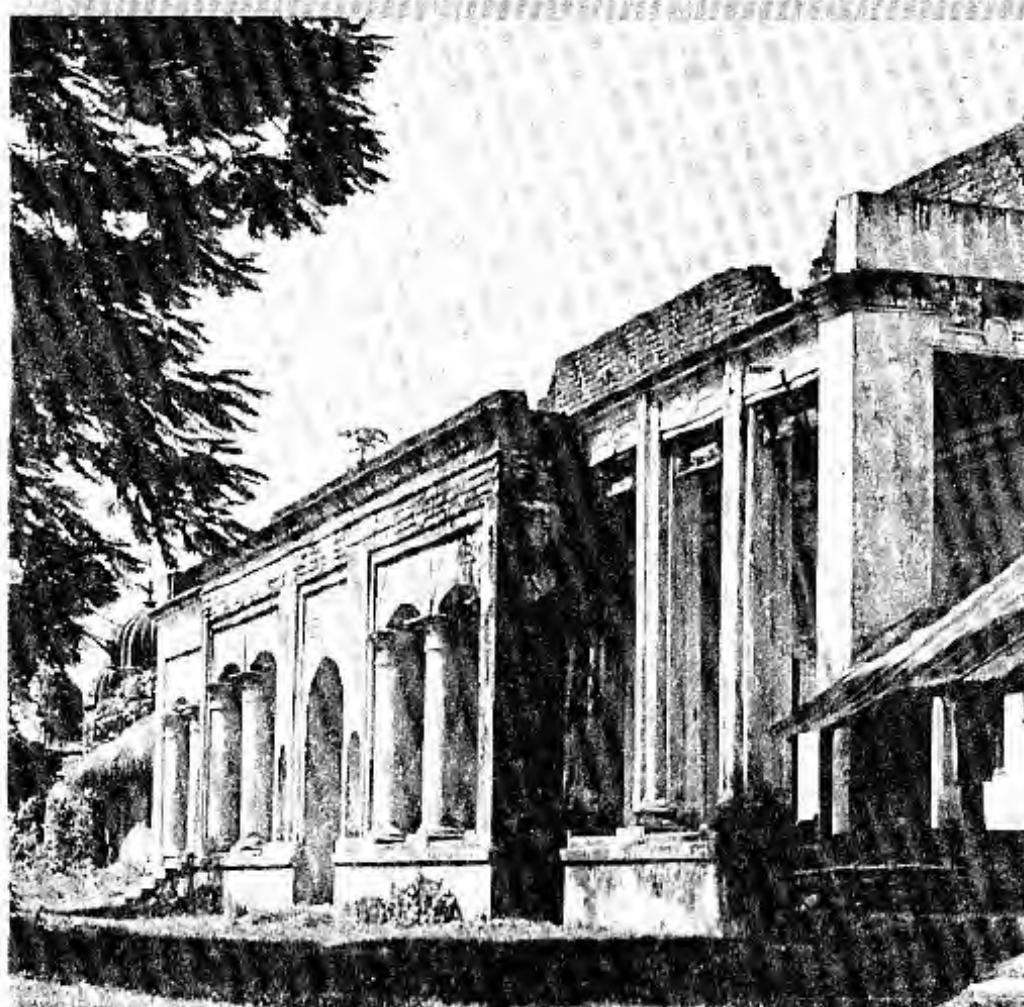
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1

The village is called Hathighar, the place of elephants, although no elephants can be seen there today. When Moti Babu's ancestors were important landlords they kept elephants in stables built of stone. The old stone mansion with its thirty rooms, where they lived, still exists but the rooms on the ground floor now store rice, wheat and other grain and the elephants' stables have been walled up and are used as store-rooms for paddy.

Etoa's grandfather says that this village was once called Salgerya and belonged to the tribals. Rows of sal trees stood like sentinels guarding the village.

"Why was the name changed?"

"The Babus came and took everything away."

"The tribals didn't protest?"

"You talk too much, Etoa. Your father won't have dared to ask so many questions. We lost out because we didn't know how to read and write. We didn't understand the laws of the government."

"Just answer one more question, Aba. When did you leave your land to come here?"

"Thousands of moons ago. Why do you laugh?"

"No one counts years by moons any more."

"We've always done so, and I'll continue to, until I die. Our forefathers left their land when Sidhu and Kanhu led the Santals against the British. What a fierce battle it was! When the British won, the Santals dispersed all over the land to escape them. A group of them came here, cleared the forest and settled down. All this happened a long time ago."

"Is that how we Mundas came here?"

The old villager, Mangal, looked at his grandchild. Young boy—he doesn't know anything. Does a tribal ever leave his land unless he is forced to? "After some years Birsa Munda was able to organize the Mundas to rebel against the British. That was another fierce battle. Arrows flew from our side; they shot with bullets. Finally we had to accept defeat, too. Like leaves before the wind, we scattered to different places in Orissa, Bihar, Bengal and Assam. We cleared forests to make new settlements. Today Mundas and Santals can be seen everywhere."



"Is that how you came here?"

"We left Chhotanagpur and walked. We crossed the river Subarnarekha and when the Santals saw us, they were happy. More adivasis meant more strength. You know that river which you call the Dulang? We used to call it the Darangarha. The area was thickly forested then, and many wild animals lived there. The Lodha tribals whom you see in our village are really forest-dwellers. They worship god Baghut so that tigers don't take away their cattle and pray to goddess Baram for protection. We cleared the woods together to make living space. But we didn't destroy the forest because the forest is our mother. The Lodhas still live by hunting."

"But the Babu says you adivasis have destroyed the forest."

"That's not true. There's very little forest left now, but whatever is there, provides us with roots, leaves, fruits, fuel, rabbits, porcupines, birds.... The old sal tree is our village deity Garam. Why should one destroy that which one worships and loves?"

"Why was the village called Hathighar?"

"When we cleared the space, the fertile earth seemed to smile. And then the Babus came. That's what always happens. We, being illiterate, lost our land. They gave the village a new name. But that's enough talking, Etoa. What makes you so curious?"

How can Etoa explain? Everyday on his way to the Babu's house he passes the primary school hut and overhears the fascinating stories the Santal school-master tells the students. He always begins his class with stories... "Then their arrows darted through the air. The sky became dark with them. How can I describe that fierce battle!"

Which is this battle the school-master talks about? Etoa doesn't know. Is it the battle of the Mahabharata? Or the Ramayana? Etoa has been to Rohini village to see the jatra performances and knows all about the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

Etoa runs along with the voice of the school-master still ringing in his ears. He works for Moti Babu, who is like the presiding deity of the village. Etoa's job is to take the cows and goats for grazing.

* * *

Hathighar is really very far from Calcutta. From Howrah you take a train to Kharagpur, then board a bus and get down in front of the Guptamani temple. Mother Baram, the protector goddess, is worshipped there and the priest is a Lodha tribal. All trucks and buses that ply the Bombay road stop to pay homage at the Guptamani temple. The bus service from Guptamani to Rohini is rather irregular but if you walk some seven or eight miles in a south-western direction you'll cross a clear little stream and come to a cluster of small adivasi villages. Then cutting through the large Rohini village you go south along the river Dulang. The river dances along with you until you see one tall sal tree



trying to reach the sky, and next to it an arjun tree. Then you know you have reached Hathighar.

At the root of these trees you'll find a large terracotta elephant and a large terracotta horse. Many small replicas of these surround the roots. Everyone in the village—tribal and non-tribal—comes here to worship the village deity Garam.

Some distance from here the Dulang river merges with the Subarnarekha. The confluence of the rivers looks like an ochre ocean. You can take a dip here if you like; you won't drown. Although the current is swift, the water is only waist-high. Etoa has often crossed over on the back of his favourite buffalo.

What does Etoa do? He takes cows, buffaloes and goats for grazing. Why is he called Etoa? Because he was born on a Sunday—etwar. Had he been born on a Monday he would have been called Somra, Somai or some such name. Tribals often name their children after the day of the week on which they are born. Those who wish to give them Bengali names do so. Etoa was named by his grandfather Mangal Munda. In this State, the Mundas, the Lodhas, the Santals know Bengali, but they also speak their own languages.

Etoa looks like an untamed colt always eager to bolt. He is only ten-years-old. He has a shock of thick reddish-brown hair, and his eyes are bright and sparkling. A pair of khaki shorts is all he ever wears. Though young, he has had to learn many hard lessons from life because his grandfather is very old. Etoa notices every fallen twig, dead branch or dry leaf and collects it for fuel.



There is a weekly market-day in the village. Etoa got a gunny-sack from the shopkeepers there in return for sweeping their stalls. He always carries this sack with him. While grazing the cows in the old mango grove, he picks up fallen unripe mangoes and bits and pieces of wood; he digs up thick tuber roots and pulls out green leafy vegetables from the bank of the silted pond. All these go into his gunny-sack.

Then he crosses to the lush grass banks on the other side of the Dulang. Leaving the cattle to graze, he runs to where the Subarnarekha flows in a narrow stream. He throws his wicker-work fishing net there. In such moments he feels like a king—the king of the river, the sky and the green fields. He tells himself, "We'll eat fish today if I'm lucky. Otherwise the leafy vegetables can always do. I'll try to exchange the tuber with grocer uncle for oil, salt and spices. If he doesn't agree, Grandfather and I will eat it ourselves."

Thinking of what he is going to eat, Etoa forgets his hunger. Dancing with joy, he addresses the waters of the river, the white catkin reeds, the wild flowers and the wide sky, "Do you know about that battle? What a



fierce one it was—arrows flew, cannon roared, the clatter of horse hooves resounded. It was a dreadful battle!"

Etoa doesn't know which battle it was that the school-master



described to his students. Was it the war of 1857-58? Or another where arrows had to counter gunshots? The master talked of different battles on different days. Etoa doesn't know, nor does he care. So long as there

was a battle, he isn't interested in the details. The sky, the humming insects that fly about in the grass, the wild flowers that sway in the wind, the herd of cows—none of them know that little Etoa is talking of a battle that was very fierce indeed. No one takes an adivasi cowherd seriously. The Dulang and Subarnarekha smiled and flowed on though it is said that the fierce battle had raged on the banks of these rivers.

Etoa doesn't believe these stories. He might as well believe the tales told by the old Lodha Bhajan Bhukta. Bhajan says that once there was a mighty tribal king. When outsiders came and took away his kingdom, he jumped into the Dulang with his copper gong and magic bow. Even today if you pray to him earnestly the king beats his gong from below the water, and emerges with his magic bow, riding an elephant. Roaring like a tiger, making the skies tremble, he will ask, "Who is calling me? Where are my soldiers? How long shall I wait to regain my kingdom and see the earth covered with forest, wild animals and the men of the forest?" He says this and rings his bell. One can hear him on a stormy night.

Bhajan Bhukta is blind. On market-days he sings and tells stories sitting in the market centre. Etoa often escorts him home and says to him, "Grandfather what wonderful stories you told today. Everybody listened attentively. See how many ten-paise coins you've collected!"

"You are a good boy, Etoa. My only regret is that you don't go to school. Our boys don't go to school because we hire them out to graze cows or collect fuel. But we have a school in our village now and the Santal school-teacher is really very good. He goes from house to house asking people to send their children to school. Our boys and girls must learn to read. But we think of our stomachs first. When I was young one had to cross four miles of forest to get to school—now there is a school in every village. Still... Go, home, son. I can walk on my own from here."



2

What does Etoa do all day? Like the sun god, Etoa can't afford to rest for a moment. He and his grandfather live in a broken-down hut. Since his parents died a long time ago, his grandfather has been both father and mother to him. Etoa ties his two goats to the trunk of the





jackfruit tree that his father had planted. His closest friend, Ratan Tudu, a Santal boy will take them along when he grazes his own goats.

Inside their hut, they sleep on a raised bamboo bunk. Mangal goes out before daybreak. When Etoa gets up, he eats some of the previous night's left over fermented rice, putting aside a portion for his grandfather. He then runs to Moti Babu's where a lot of work awaits him.

First he has to sweep the large inner courtyard. Then he has to pump water from the tubewell and water the vegetable garden adjoining the house. Afterwards he will go to the cowshed and call the cows and buffaloes by name, and take them out grazing.

Everyday on his way to work Etoa pauses to listen to the schoolmaster:

"On one side there were cannon and modern guns. On the other, only swords and old-fashioned muskets. Our soldiers fought with real courage. If the British finally

won, it was because of their superior weapons and disciplined army. Our soldiers had only their patriotism and their valour. But it was an unforgettable battle. The fighting was fierce indeed!"

Etoa too has to battle every day to fill his gunny-sack—but it's a battle he is unaware of. He washes his gunny-sack carefully in the Dulang. It serves as his raincoat during the monsoon, his blanket during winter. Of course, they also have a patchwork quilt, which Mangal made from old clothes brought from Ganoar at the weekly market. Etoa covers Mangal with it at night. He is old and feels the cold more. Etoa can manage with the sack.

It's a pity that Etoa doesn't go to school. Mangal was so very keen that he study.



Etoa was born on the day of the Bandhna or Sohrai festival, which usually falls after Diwali. In Hathighar, tribals and non-tribals live peacefully. They celebrate Durga puja and Kali puja and enjoy



watching the jatra performances. But the tribals have their own jatra troupes, too, and prefer the jatras performed in Santali or Mundari. The actors are friends and they understand the language better.

Although there are hardly any tigers now, on Bandhna day, Baghut, the god who protects cattle from the tiger which once took a heavy toll of their livestock is worshipped. Leaves smeared with vermillion paste are spread in front of the god and everyone has to drive his cow across the puja-ground. The first cow who eats a vermillion-covered leaf is considered very auspicious. Its horns are smeared with oil and vermillion. The people gather around its owner who according to custom, has to invite all the tribals to a feast.

At night the men go around the cowsheds, beating their drums and singing in praise of the cow. The cow is their greatest friend.

Etoa has often gone around with them and joined in the singing:

Wake up mother Bhagavati

Wake up mother Bhagavati

Wake up on this night of the new moon.

The owners of the cows give money to the singers which is later spent on a feast.

The next day the women clean the cowsheds and draw white designs on freshly clay-smeared floors. The design of the cow-hoof is essential. Then the three chief deities, Buru Bonga, Haram Burhi and Dharam are worshipped and a red cock, black hen and white hen are sacrificed. The puja is followed by a feast and then, after the women have smeared the horns of the cows with oil and vermillion again, they are taken to the fields.

The next day, all the cows and buffaloes are tied to poles in a courtyard and people sing and dance around them.

This is how Bandhna is celebrated in Etoa's village. In some villages they don't worship Baghut but pray to some other deity. In some communities Bandhna is celebrated for five days; in some places for three. Even those who don't own cows join in the festivities.

When Etoa was born during this festival, people said he was a lucky child who would do well in life. The naming was done according to custom. A vessel was filled with water and, in the name of the village god, a grain of paddy and a blade of grass were floated on it. Uttering the word 'mangal' silently, a second grain of paddy was floated. If the new-born happened to be a boy, the grandfather's name had to be taken for the ritual. If the second grain touched the grass he would have been called Mungra or Mungla, but that didn't happen. The child's father wanted to give him a Bengali name but the grandfather said that since he is born on a Sunday—*etwar*—we'll call him Etoa.

When he was six-months-old, his ears were pierced in the Tukui Lutr ceremony. (The adivasis don't have the rice-eating ceremony). Paddy was spread in the courtyard and a wooden plank placed on it. Etoa was made to lie on this plank while his ears were pierced. Rice-cakes made with jaggery were eaten by those attending the ceremony. A black cock was sacrificed and after a community feast all the adivasi mothers brought a little oil and baskets of paddy. The oil was rubbed on Etoa's head and the paddy was placed in a heap as a present to the child.

Mangal couldn't afford to feed the whole community but the custom among the tribals is that when one is invited to a feast one brings whatever one can—rice, *dal* or vegetables.

Etoa lost both his parents when he was one-year-old. So long as Mangal, his son and son's wife all worked in the fields things were not too bad.

* * *

The tribal new year begins with the month of Magh and is marked by the Magh Chandum or Maghe Sim festival. Girls and young married women go to the elders, wash their feet and seek their blessing.

Every year during the harvest season the Santals, Mundas and Lodhas of Hathigarh worked in the fields of Kanak Babu who lived in the city. After harvesting the paddy they took their share home. This year, however, unknown to them Kanak Babu had sold his land. The new owner employed his own labourers. The tribals had no idea that they won't be allowed to harvest the crop they had planted. Instead of a daily wage they were paid in grain. This year they were denied even that.

Santal Chand Murmu lost his temper and shouted, "How is it that we weren't even told that the land had been sold? We have sowed the seeds and we shall reap the harvest."

Trouble followed. The police came and arrested the Hathigarh tribals. Subal, Chand's father, and Mangal walked twenty-six miles to the city to meet the Santal lawyer, Jaichand. "Your father was my friend Jaichand," Subal said, "and you belong to the village where my daughter has been married. Please help us. Get our people released from police custody."

Jaichand was a good man. He managed to get all the thirty-six people released, but it took him several months. On the way back from the city, Etoa's parents must have eaten something which gave them food poisoning. They died in the city hospital. Chand Murmu brought little Etoa back and placing the child on Mangal's lap, stood silently, head bowed.

"What did they eat, Chand?"

"Over-ripe fruits perhaps. Or rotten sweets. I really don't know."

"Where did they get the money?"

"Uncle, we thought instead of returning home empty-handed we would work somewhere for a few days. They were working in a brick kiln."

"Chand, how can I, an old man, bring up a child, and earn a living?"

Alomani, the elderly woman of the village, whom everybody called aunt, said, "Give the child to me, brother. I'll look after him."

"Go, take him away. Lucky boy, after devouring his own parents!"

"How is it his fault, Uncle?" Chand intervened.

Alomani said, "Let him speak. He'll feel better. Otherwise the fire within his chest will keep smouldering."

Mangal sat in his hut for two days stony-faced. On the third day, he went to Alomani, "Give me the child. I'll have to be both his father and mother; his *aba* and *enga* now."

With the child on his shoulder, he went to Moti Babu, and asked for work.

"Can you manage what your son did?"

"At one time I did all the work Babu, don't you remember? My son went to school then."

"That was your big mistake. If you people send your children to school, who'll work in our farms and gardens? Who will graze the cattle? You can't say I cheat you. I give you one meal a day and some snacks. Two sets of clothes a year and, in addition, seventy-four kilos of



paddy. Let no one say that Moti Babu cheats his workers."

"I know what you give, Babu. Most of my life has been spent in your service. I so wanted my son to be educated."

"Then why didn't you let him continue in school?"

"How could I? When his mother died, I lost my helpmate. What you gave didn't fill both our stomachs. So I had to hire him out to your brother as a cowherd."

"Everything's in the hands of God, Mangal. Who'll be educated, who'll not, is decreed by fate!"

"Let's not talk about fate, Babu. Tell me, are you going to give me a job or not?"

"You speak too roughly, Mangal."

"I am an uneducated adivasi. How could I know sweet speech? My son and his wife are dead. Do you expect honeyed words from me now?"

"I see. Is that how things are these days?"

Moti Babu's mother said, "Moti, is that the way to talk to Mangal? He is an old man, respected by the adivasis. One word from him and no adivasi will come to work for you."

"All right, let him work."

"I'll have to bring the child with me."

"Then how will you work?"

"That's my problem. As long as you get your work done you should not worry."

Among the adivasis, an orphan is looked after by the community. Chand Murmu's wife said, "Uncle, I am already bringing up two children—my son Singrai and nephew Ratan. Etoa will be my third child. They'll all be milk brothers. Think of your age and give him to me."

"Etoa is all I have."

"All right, then. But if you have to go out, or when you go to the market, leave him with me. Take him back after work."

"Agreed."

Since then Etoa, Singrai and Ratan have been very close. From the time they were six, the three friends had been famous.

* * *

Karam puja is another important festival for the adivasis. It is celebrated in the month of Bhado—for prosperity in agriculture. Women fill closely woven bamboo baskets with sand and plant seeds of different grains in them. After some days these seeds sprout.

The next morning a courtyard is cleaned and swept for the worship of Karam devata. After fasting the whole day, women bring their baskets of sprouting grain there. Singing and dancing to the beating of drums,



men and women go to cut a branch of the karam tree. This branch becomes the god. The last time, Etoa and his two friends went with the group and danced as they sang:

We go to cut the branch of the sacred Karam
See how the tree welcomes us!

This branch is our king Karam
Look how handsome is our king!

The branch is planted on an earthen altar and, after the puja, the women sit in a circle around the priest.

The tale of Karam devata is very fascinating. As the priest narrates the story, he occasionally asks the women to offer flowers to the god.

When the story ends, the women go home, dancing and singing, to break their fast. Then the men begin their dance, and when the women return, they join them.

Karam puja is Etoa's favourite festival. Bhajan Bhukta tells him that when the Santals and Mundas lived in their own lands this festival was celebrated in a much grander way. The fields used to be green with crops.

"Grandpa, what happened to those fields?"

"Everything has vanished, as if by magic."

"Then why do we still celebrate Karam puja?"

"Some of us still have a little land. And a seasonal festival has to be celebrated when the season comes."

Subal Murmu tries to explain the rituals to Etoa. Ratan says that in the high school they even celebrate Saraswati puja.



"Of course, they do. At least ten of our adivasi boys who studied there have become school-teachers. Without proper education, there is little hope for the adivasis."

Alomani said, "In our childhood, we didn't have such opportunities. Now even girls can go to school. My brother has sent his daughter to the boarding-school in town."

Subal said, "The schools were very far away in those days. Also our parents didn't understand the importance of schooling. Even men didn't study much—not to speak of the girls."

"Because we keep our children illiterate, we suffer so! Everyone can't be as lucky as my uncle Gura Sing!"

Everyone laughed at the mention of Gura Sing. Etoa thought, one day I must hear the story of Gura Sing.

When Etoa was seven-years-old, Mangal said, "Come, I'll take you to school. I have repaired your shorts. The shirt is a bit torn, but it is clean; it will do."

The Santal school-master Gangadhar Hembrom, wrote Etoa's name and roll number and said to Mangal, "Please buy him a slate and chalk. I'll give him books, notebooks and wooden pencils."

"When will you give him the books?"

"When the government sends them to us. This year classes have begun, but we haven't received the books yet. I've been running to the town every other day. And you know the condition of the roads. Uncle, can you introduce me to the organizers of the Hathighar Adivasi Club?"

"Yes, I will. But, Master, please see that the boy learns to read and write properly. I also wanted his father to go to school. But when the adivasi doesn't have land, he doesn't have food in his kitchen either. That's why we have to send our boys to work in the Babu's house."

"It's a problem all of us face, Uncle, specially the adivasis. I had to fight with my family to go to school in Mohini village. I had a scholarship but I had to work in the Babu's garden also. I had to run to school. At the end of the year when I stood second in the primary examination, my father relented."

"Because we didn't know how to read and write and were afraid of the law courts, the Babus gradually took everything away from us—our land, our cattle..."

"Yes, Uncle. Education is very necessary. Because we are illiterate, we don't know what schemes the government has introduced for us."

"I am leaving my Etoa in your hands."

"Don't worry. Listen Etoa, when you get a jaggery cake do you eat it alone or do you share it with your friends?"

"I share with them."

"All good things must be shared. School is a good place—you must bring your friends."



"I'll ask them to come."

"Today I'll show you how big our country, India, is."

"I-N-D-I-A. Is India our country?"

"Look, this is called a map."

"Where is Hathighar?"

"Here is our State, West Bengal. This is our district Midnapur. Hathighar should be here—somewhere in the south-west corner."

"Why can't I see it?"

"I'll bring a map of the district from the town. But tell me how will you be able to locate Hathighar?"

"Why? I'll learn to read. I'll know."

"That's what I want to hear. Now look at the blackboard. This is the first letter of the alphabet, 'Aw', that you've got to learn."

"Aw, Aw, Aw."

"Now copy it on your slate. I'll show you how."

From that instant Etoa fell in love with the teacher. How kind he was, how patient. But Etoa had one regret. During his days in school, the teacher didn't begin the lesson with stories of battles.

* * *

On his way back from school, Etoa ran across Moti Babu on his new cycle. He stopped and asked, "So Mangal is sending his grandson to school?"

"Yes, Babu."

"He's making a mistake. I told Mangal that one of these days I'd give a job to his grandson."

Etoa stood silent.

"If you people go for education who'll do the work for us? In any case, how long can you study? Have you enough food at home?"

Etoa ran to his grandfather as soon as the Babu vanished beyond the

big peepul. The tree was old and people said snakes lived in it. It couldn't be true. Etoa knew that snakes lived in holes in the ground and only climbed the tree to eat the eggs from birds' nests. Snakes were treacherous. They entered houses stealthily to bite people. Water snakes or rat snakes weren't poisonous but rat snakes could lash at you with their tails. Those Santals who ate snakes swore that their meat was very tasty.

"Does it taste like field rats?"

"A little different."

Mangal doesn't eat these things, but Etoa has tasted all kinds of meat with his friends—field rats, porcupines, snakes.

When Etoa reached home, he told Mangal that Moti Babu was angry about his going to school.

"I know, I know. Moti Babu doesn't want our children to be educated. But the government has given us schools in the adivasi areas for adivasi children. The adivasi must learn to read and write. Everyone can't be as lucky as Gura Sing."

"What did Gura Sing do?"

"I'll tell you one day."

Together they brought the goats inside. Etoa filled the pitcher from the tube-well. As Mangal lit the fire for cooking, he told Etoa to cut the fish.

"Aba, don't say you've spent your money on fish!"

"Just a little. Your first day at school deserves something special."

Subal Murmu came to chat and smoke a bidi with Mangal. Mangal and Subal had been friends from childhood—and both were good archers. They had won many prizes in local competitions. Adivasis are often good sportsmen and athletes. Archery tournaments are held in these areas often—be it Annual Day in the high school, Birsa Munda's anniversary, Martyr's Day in memory of Sidhu and Kanhu or

a Sport's Day. Some of the Lodha girls too are excellent marksmen but they don't enter these contests.

Etoa told Subal in a low voice, "The teacher says Singrai and Ratan should also go to school."

"I know they should Etoa, but Moti Babu's brother has fifty cows and buffaloes. I've given him my word that I'll send the boys to look after his cattle."

Mangal sighed. "How long will this go on? For one meal a day, a few clothes and a portion of paddy our children remain illiterate. The whole world is moving forward but the adivasi children will remain where they are—illiterate and ignorant."

"That's true. Everyone can't be as lucky as Gura Sing."

Etoa said, "You must tell me about Gura Sing today."

"I will, I will," Subal assured him. "But first clean and cut the fish. Let me see if Mangal remembers how to cook. He used to be an excellent cook, you know. He cooked the meat after our hunting festivals. Where have the animals vanished, Mangal? Where have the forests gone?"

Mangal said in a dry voice, "Some tracts still remain around Nayagram near Orissa. The new bridge across the Subarnarekha might be of some benefit but whatever forests we have will disappear; we will be left with a desert."

"Before that happens let's take the boys there once. Let them see how the adivasis live entirely on the forest."

"Yes, let's go."

Etoa asked, "Live entirely on the forest? How do they do that?"

Subal answered in a dreamy voice, "They use the oil of mahua seeds for cooking and lighting their lamps. They dry the mahua flower and make small cakes. They live on roots, leaves and fruits. They also eat deer, birds and small animals. They use sal leaves for plates and press oil



out of neem and sal seeds."

"Seems a wonderful life."

"Once all adivasis lived like this. The forest is our mother, we are her children. Even when we farmed, we didn't give up the forest. But times have changed, Etoa. The adivasis must move with the times to survive."

"Subal, that's why I say send the boys to school."

"Let me see. If not this year, maybe next year..."

"Aren't you going to tell me Gura Sing's story, Aba?"

"Why should you wait for Mangal to tell you the story. I'll tell you. Now that you are going to school, you should hear it. Adivasis can learn many a lesson from his story..."

"Well. It happened only the other day but it seems like a long time ago. On the banks of the Subarnarekha there were a number of Munda and Lodha villages and Gura Sing had a lot of land there. This reminds me, Mangal, your Etoa is a gem. On market-days he walks home with Bhajan Bhukta. Bhajan also owned land once. So... Let me see. Yes, Gura Sing was a big landowner. He had five sons and ten heads of cattle. But his sons were all foolish and illiterate and, moreover, Gura Sing was fond of liquor."

"Subal my friend, we adivasis don't drink liquor—it's liquor that devours us."

"We drink to drown our sorrows, Mangal."

"Hendia, the country brew, doesn't harm, but the liquor that's distilled in the markets does."

"That's what finished Gura Sing. Gopi used to tell him, 'Why do you want to pay, Gura? Drink your fill. I'll put it on your account; you only have to put your thumb impression on this white paper'."

"And he did that?"

"Yes, that's what he did. At the end of the year Gura found that he had only ten bighas of land—the rest was in Gopi's possession. He

came to us crying, 'I am in deep trouble, brother. Gopi is taking me to court. I have to make a statement that I have sold this land to him.' His sons also came asking for help. Then Mangal, I and the others made Gura take a vow that he would give up drinking. Then we fixed a day to go to the town with him to meet a very clever Santal lawyer."

"An adivasi lawyer?"

"Yes, child. Adivasis can be lawyers, school-teachers—and now many of our girls too have become teachers and nurses. So the lawyer first said, 'This Gopi needs a beating and so does Gura Sing.' That's his way of speaking. Finally he said, 'Gura, when you're in court just repeat whatever the magistrate says. Do not utter a word of your own'."

"Then what happened?"

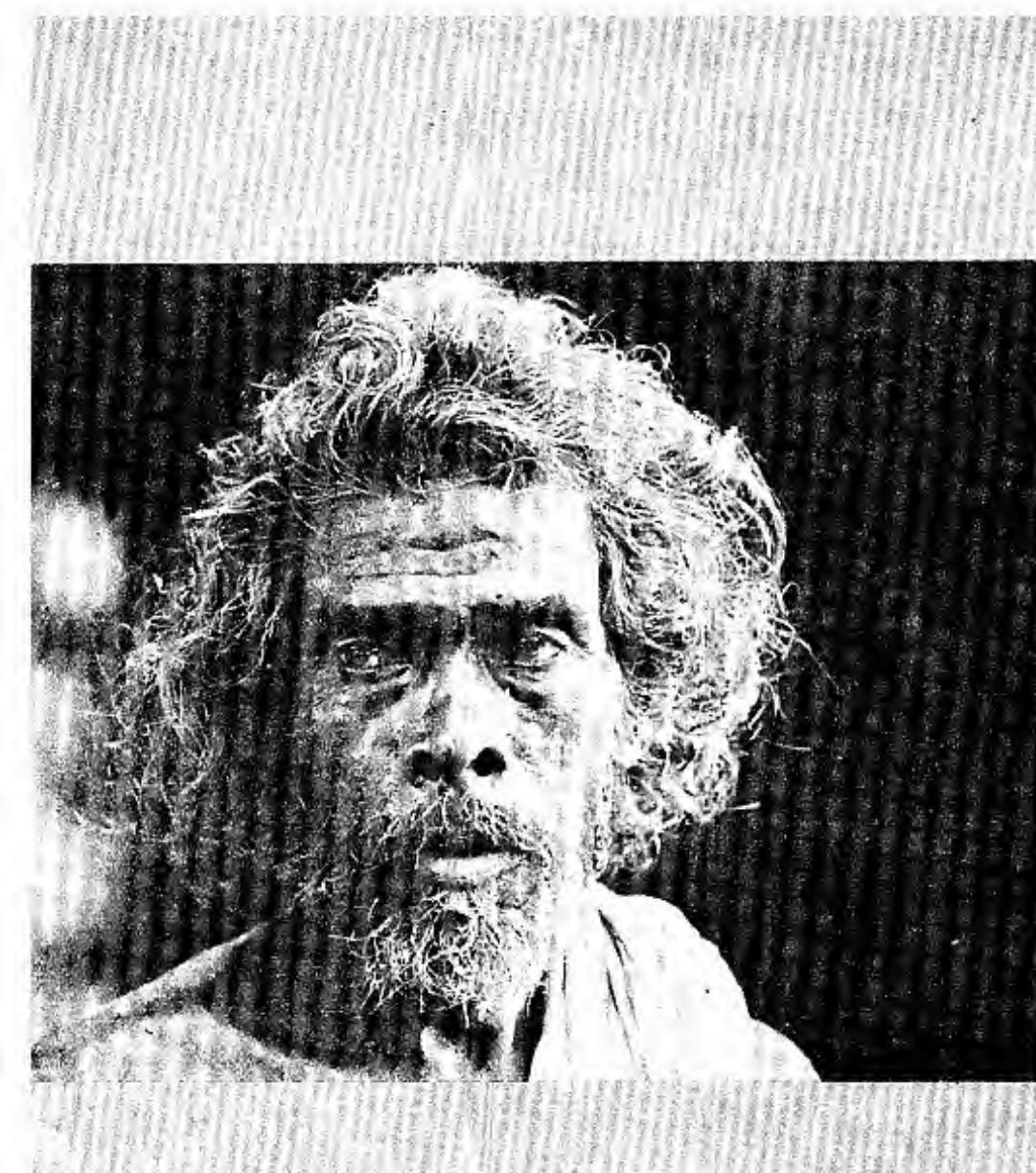
"In court the peon called out, 'Gura Sing! Gura Sing!' And Gura repeated, 'Gura Sing! Gura Sing!' They said, 'Answer properly. Are you Gura Sing?' He echoed, 'Answer properly, are you Gura Sing?' It went on like this for some time. The magistrate was in a dilemma. Gopi's lawyer said, 'Are you an ass? Why are you behaving so foolishly?' Gura repeated, 'Are you an ass? Why are you behaving so foolishly?' The magistrate said, 'Can't you understand the simplest words? Are you such a fool?' Gura repeated the same words to the magistrate. The magistrate lost his temper. He said, 'I refuse to conduct this case. The case is dismissed. Why have you brought an idiot to court?'"

"Then?"

"Then the Santal lawyer explained everything to the magistrate. Gopi was humiliated; he also had to pay a fine. They found out that he was going to buy adivasi land which is illegal."

"Gura Sing got his land back?"

"Of course. Then we all went to the teashop. Gopi came there and



shouted, 'Gura, I'll kill you for this.' Gura replied, 'Gura, I'll kill you for this.' And we all chased Gopi out of the teashop.

"Gopi ran away and never returned. That was the end of his attempt to cheat the adivasis of their land by getting them drunk. We even succeeded in removing his shop from the market-place. This is the story of Gura Sing. It was the only time that an illiterate adivasi managed to outwit others and keep his land."

Mangal said, "If he had been literate, he would have been able to hold on to his land. It only proves that whatever the obstacles, the tribals must get educated."

* * *

By the time Etoa received his new books, the summer vacation was on them. The teacher said, "Learn the alphabet well during the holidays. Then we will begin the lessons in school."

"Are you going home for the vacation, Sir?"

"Yes. I have to study too."

"Why? You're already a teacher!"

"I'm studying to become a better teacher. You must learn to read well. Who knows, one day you might come first in your class."

Yes, Etoa wanted to study very much, but he knew he would have to help his grandfather, too. There was a lot of work in Moti Babu's house. Mangal couldn't possibly manage everything by himself.

* * *

Many things happened during that summer vacation. Ratan, Singrai and Etoa began to play together again. When Etoa told them the story of Gura Sing they were very amused. They laughed a lot.

Then there was Bhajan Bhukta's granddaughter Sona's wedding.

Bhajan told Etoa, "I'm a poor man, I can't invite many people but you must come."

When Mangal heard this, he wanted to know who would mend the fence if Etoa went to the wedding.

"The wedding will be only one day. I'll put up the fence after that. I'll bring cactus branches from across the Dulang and plant them. That'll teach the goats a lesson. And when the rains come these branches will grow, won't they?"

"Yes, they will. But you must study, too."

"I'll study and do everything else. You'll see."

"All right, you can go to the wedding. Bhajan is fond of you."

* * *



The paddy left in the field after harvesting is called *tung*. Everyone in the village is allowed to collect it. But human beings have to compete with field rats. These rats dig a maze of tunnels and, their families build secret storehouses under the ground. Adivasi children try to ferret out this rice and some of them eat the rats.

Even today the Lohas eat rats, monitor lizards, snakes, crabs, fish--whatever they can lay their hands on. As a result they are experts in the secrets of the forest. Even the Lohas who are now engaged in farming have not forgotten their hunting skill. They use goat-skins to make chhangu drums, which they beat while dancing and singing. Whatever other gods and goddesses they worship, the festival of Sheetala still remains the most important.

Etoa told Mangal, "During the vacation I'll take the cows for grazing; you water the vegetable garden. And I can easily sweep the Babu's courtyard, too."

"But when will you study?"

"I'll study in the evening. You'll see."

"Well, be careful."

"Why, what's on your mind?"

"I was thinking I can't sit around idle all day. I'll cut date-palm leaves and weave them into mats. That's what I used to do earlier."

When Etoa was taking the cattle out of the cowshed, Moti Babu saw him. He seemed pleased.

"So you've decided to help your grandfather!"

"Yes, during the vacation, Babu."

"What, are you going back to school?"

Etoa only nodded. How could Moti Babu know what the school-teacher had told him. He said that he was going to bring all the Santal, Munda and Lohia children to school. When the school reopened, he would bring story-books and he would read them out to them. After

the examination he would give them prizes out of his own money.

"In the old days, Etoa," the teacher had said, "it was enough to have your bow and arrow. These days education is your weapon for survival."

When Etoa crossed the Dulang with the Babu's cows and his own goats and arrived at the sandbanks of the Subarnarekha, he suddenly felt free and happy. He spread his arms and pirouetted. He jumped, he danced. After setting the fishing-net he walked into the tall grass. He saw that the old rabbit was still there. Let it stay, he thought. Etoa would never kill it nor would he tell anyone about it. He plucked some edible leaves for home and managed to catch five or six small fish; then he found some abandoned birds' nests. He thought, let me take



these—they are great for starting the cooking fire. Two more days are left for Sona's wedding, Etoa thought. Today and tomorrow. The marriage is the day after. As he put the nests inside the gunny-sack he shouted to the sky and the wind, "What do you know, I'll be able to read everything—aw, aa, e, ee." As if in response the sky leaned down, the long grass waved with joy.

The next day Sona's brother came to call Etoa. "There are so many rituals before the wedding. Don't you want to see them?"

Etoa went with him. He saw the women take a new earthen pot to Garam the village deity and consecrate it by singing. Today Sona's father would cook fish and rice in the pot and make an offering to his ancestors. Spade in hand, the women went singing and the men beat drums. They took three spadefuls of earth from the root of the old Sidha tree and put it in Bhajan's courtyard where the wedding platform would be erected. Before striking the spade on the ground, mother earth has to be worshipped and her forgiveness sought for the hurt inflicted on her.

The women then went in a group to the Dulang river, singing. By shooting an arrow a part of the water was marked out and, they filled their pitchers from the marked portion. Then a messenger was sent to the bridegroom with a pot containing pressed rice, sweets, a mirror, a comb and a pair of bangles. Sona was already looking like a bride in a new sari. She had a red string around her neck, yellow threads around her wrists and her body was bright with turmeric. Nobody would believe that only the other day she was romping around the forests, grazing her goats.

Bhajan said, "Eat with us, Etoa."

"Not today, Grandpa," Etoa replied. "I must get back to Aba."

* * *

Etoa found Mangal in the old mango grove. He had collected a bundle of firewood and looked tired, very tired. Etoa had not noticed how old his grandfather had become.

"Go home, Aba, I'll graze the cows and water the garden and bring the bundle home."

"Let me rest here awhile. Take this pile of wood to the grocer and ask him for some oil and salt. When you reach home put the rice to boil."

"Come with me."

"I will shortly. Tell me, what did you see in Bhajan's house?"

"Many of their customs are like ours."

"What present will you give Sona?"

"What can I give?"

"Why not the mat I've woven?"

"That's too pretty. You've put colours in it, too. It will fetch at least five or seven rupees in the market."

Mangal spoke in a faint voice, "You shouldn't go to a wedding empty-handed, Etoa. Among adivasis marriage is a shared responsibility. Each one brings whatever he can afford."

"What do those who live in the city do?"

"They come to the village for their wedding, don't they? How would I know what they do in the city to keep up our customs?"

"Chand Uncle says that the customs in the villages where we originally lived were different."

"He should know. He has travelled a lot. But, however much times change, we try to hold on to our customs and rituals, festivals and way of life. Not that we can maintain them exactly as they were. Earlier, during the Sarhul Baha or Surjom Baha festivals hundreds of sal trees would be in flower; the flame of the forest and the silk cotton blazed with colour. The men and women danced in the forest the entire night. Those were the days! Now we don't even have enough trees!"

"Our teacher says that we'll plant lots of trees to celebrate Independence Day."

"That's good. Now get along to the grocer's."

"What a pile of wood you've collected, Aba!"

"It's all from that dying mango tree."

"Don't sit under it, Aba. A branch might fall on you!"

"No, no. That tree is my friend."

"How can a tree be your friend?"

"It is. I know each one of these trees. All these mango trees are married, you know."

"Married?"

"The Lodha bridegroom has to get married to a mango tree before he can marry his bride. Similarly a girl has to first marry a mahua tree."

"What strange customs!"

"They are good customs, Etoa. One should be strong like a tree—and like a tree be useful."

Etoa dragged the bundle of wood to the grocer's. After getting oil and salt he would make a fish curry and add the roots he had collected the previous day. Grandfather brought home some rice everyday. The Babu must be giving it to him and adjusting it against his due at the end of the year. There was water to be fetched, the yard to be swept. How could Aba do so much work by himself.

Did Etoa miss his parents? He couldn't remember either of them. His grandfather was his entire world. He knew that his mother used to sing. Etoa, too, sang well. One day he would join the Munda jatra party and act the part of the king, brandish his wooden sword and punish wrongdoers.

After harvesting if the crop was good, the adivasis held jatra performances. The Adivasi Club of Hathighar was going to start its own jatra party.

When he had finished the work at home, Etoa fastened the door-chain, ran to Moti Babu's garden and watered the vegetable-beds. Moti Babu was very pleased. He said, "How quickly you work, Etoa! In the blinking of an eyelid the job is done. If you worked for me I would feed you well and give you good clothes, too. Not just a pair of shorts, but a shirt and a shoulder-cloth as well."

"But..."

"Yes I know Mangal is pig-headed. Look at Ratan and Singrai. They are living like kings in my brother's house."

Etoa tried not to listen.

* * *

The next day, Etoa put on a pair of clean shorts and a shirt, and carrying the new mat under his arm, set off for the wedding. The bridegroom was a sturdy young man from another village. Sona looked like a golden oriole. Her brother Manik told Etoa that the bridegroom was very brave. He had killed a bear once.

"Where?"

"In their village by the forest. I'll also go there for hunting."

The women were singing:

The bride will be married to the mahua tree

The groom will be married to the mango

How happy will the wedding be

The groom's name on the mango leaf

The bride's name on the mahua leaf

How happy will the wedding be.

Sona bathed in the water, ritually marked out by the arrow, collected the previous day. Then she came out wearing a red-bordered white sari, holding her brother's wife's hand. The bridegroom was accompanied by his brother's wife. The Lodha priest tied their hands with a thread and



after sprinkling water upon them, untied their hands. Sona was taken around the bridegroom in a clockwise direction. When he took her home, he would put vermillion in the parting of her hair.

The wedding was followed by a wedding-feast with rice and mutton. Before sunset, a covered bullock-cart came to take Sona to her husband's village. Sona wept but more than her, wept her little sister. Old blind Bhajan said, "My favourite granddaughter goes away today, leaving an emptiness in my heart."

There is no system of dowry among adivasis. The bridegroom's party had to pay one hundred rupees as bride price to take away the bride, who shone bright as gold.

* * *

Mangal said, "Now that Sona's wedding is over, you must concentrate on your studies, Etoa. And come to the Adivasi Club this evening. There's a meeting."

"Can children come to the meeting?"

"Yes, this time children will also attend."



"Why is your voice so faint? Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm getting old. How can I be as I used to?"

"But you've to remain alive till I grow up and go from this school to the school at Mohini where there is a hostel. One day I'll be a school-teacher. If you don't live long enough to see this, I'll never talk to you, Aba."

"I pray to Birsa Bhagwan that I live to see that day."

* * *

The summer vacation was full of excitement. Every year the Hathighar Adivasi Club arranged tournaments and celebrated Sidhu-Kanhu day on 30 June in commemoration of the great Santal rebellion of 1855-1856. On 15 November they observed the birthday of Birsa Bhagwan, the great leader of the Mundas. In the evenings, they read books and journals in the club-room and played carrom. Jiten Murmu who worked in a bank in the city sent sports magazines, weeklies and books for the club. The older boys trained the younger ones in football or organized them for drills and work-outs.

Praharaj Sing Munda was a senior school-teacher in Lalbari village. He said, "Get some education and be good at sports. It will help you get jobs."





The Adivasi Club also arranged cultural functions—dance and song competitions and even recitations in the tribal languages.

But this year everything was different.

Prahraj said, "It's a pity that our children mostly don't go to school and when they do, they don't do well."

Chand said, "When the parents can't provide food, how can they afford to give them education?"

"Don't I know this? Still, they have to go to school!"

"Even when they can't follow what goes on?"

"That's precisely what I want to tell you. Jiten has given us a petromax. Those of us who can, will give extra lessons here in the evenings. But we need a one-rupee subscription from each family to pay for the expenses—oil for the lamp, books, slates, etc."



"Well, even if they do study what's their future? They'll ultimately end up as cowherds."

"How do you know? We elders, have to listen to the teacher too. We are partly responsible for their neglect. Our children will go to school and we'll help them with their studies in the evening."

Bhairo Sing Munda had become more and more short-tempered with the years. He shouted, "That's all very well, but what about our roads? Because we don't have a road, buses don't come to our village. Because there is no water for irrigation we can't raise two crops a year."

"We'll educate the people and put forward our demands jointly. Even to get milk from its mother a child has to cry. But education is the first priority."

Mangal gently reminded Bhairo Sing of Gura Sing's story. Praharaj repeated, "Yes, remember Gura Sing's story. Never put your thumb impression on blank paper and try to go slow on drink."

"What else?" Bhairo challenged.

"Well, we're told we destroy the forest. We know who is actually responsible. This year our children will plant trees at the club, in the school and around our homes."

"Who'll give you the seedlings?"

"The government."

"When will you start the evening school at the club?"

"Why not from tomorrow? We'll also teach the children to sing and play the flute. Etoa, Ratan, Singrai all sing well; I have heard them, while grazing cattle. And look at Uncle Mangal—even at this age he works so hard so that his grandchild can go to school. Can't young men like you learn from his example?"

"Well, the new school-teacher seems to talk sense. Let's see what we can do to help him."

"Look, among the Lodhas even a girl has become a graduate. Uncle you must admit that if you make an effort, you're bound to succeed."

Etoa was full of joy. The club which was the preserve of adults would now also be open to children.

While grazing the cows the next day Etoa sang loudly. Addressing the waters of the Dulang he announced, "You'll see now, you'll see. Everything is going to change. Our teacher is wonderful, do you know that?"

Adivasi children have some special problems in school. Because they live in the open, in the midst of fields and rivers, sitting inside a school-room for long spells, gives them a feeling of suffocation. If their teacher is an adivasi, they are more at ease. They can understand him and he follows their problems. Although most of the tribals in this

region speak Bengali, the poor illiterate village children cannot totally follow the Bengali spoken by the urban people. But they have no difficulty understanding the language of Moti Babu. After all, he belongs to the same village.

Suddenly Etoa saw a golden land monitor. "Run away and hide," he told the creature. The Lodhas search for a golden land monitor on the second day of Durga puja. According to legend, on this day their king Kalketu went to the forest to look for the magical blue flower without which one could not worship the forest goddess, Aranya-Chandika. He didn't find any flowers, but caught a golden land monitor instead. He tied it with creepers and brought it home. On arrival it changed into the forest goddess who helped Kalketu found a tribal kingdom. But outsiders attacked him and took away his kingdom. The Lodhas, hunters by profession, believe that killing a golden monitor on the second day of Durga puja makes a man brave and valiant like Kalketu.

After collecting some roots and leafy vegetables Etoa climbed on the back of his favourite buffalo. He knew so little about Sidhu or Kanhu or about Birsa Bhagwan. But he shouted to the sky, "Once I learn to read I'll find out all about them."

* * *

Etoa didn't know that it was his last day of happiness; his excitement about learning to read was to be short-lived. On his way home, while he was lying on the back of his buffalo and singing aloud, he suddenly heard the noise of people running and shouting, "Etoa, where are you? Mangal has been crushed under a tree."

"No!" Etoa screamed and ran towards Chand and Bhairo. Why were they looking so pale?

"Go to Moti Babu's mango grove."



"What's happened?"

"A branch fell... Go ahead, I'll put the cows in the cowshed."

"It must be that dying tree."

Yes, it was the dying tree. People had managed to lift the branch, get Mangal out and make him lie down. But his right leg was so swollen and his forehead was so beaded with sweat that it was obvious that he was in great pain.

"Aba, Aba!"

"Etoa, you were right. The dying tree. I leant against that branch to light my bidi, and it fell pinning me to the ground..."

Chand said, "You were lucky it didn't fall on your chest!"

"Take me home...."

The men made an improvised stretcher to carry him home. One of them called the tribal doctor, Shashi Lodha.

Prahraj Sing had often taken patients from the village to the town hospital for treatment. He immediately said it wasn't a case for Shashi Lodha. "Go ask Moti Babu for the bullock-cart with the rubber tyres."

"Will the Babu agree?"

"He'll have to. Uncle Mangal works for him. He was injured while doing his work..."

Mangal protested faintly, "I've never been to a hospital in my life."

"Uncle, there's a first time for everything. This time the Health Centre at Mohini won't do."

"Our Shashi can fix the broken bones of the cows and goats."

"You're neither a cow nor a goat. You must also think of Etoa."

Chand said angrily, "This tree of Moti Babu has to be cut down. Who knows when it will kill someone?"

Alomani tried to say something about the evil spirits in the tree, but the men stopped her. Moti Babu was somewhat hesitant but he lent his cart. He couldn't, however, resist saying that if Etoa had come to work instead of his grandfather the misiap wouldn't have occurred. "It was all due to Mangal's stubbornness," he added.

Moti Babu also gave some money. He reasoned that when living in water, it was better not to displease the crocodiles. He was surrounded by adivasis; if they got angry they might send their special messages to other villages by couriers who carried the knotted barks of sal trees. Then they would all attack his estate with their bows and arrows. (This refers to a system of sending messages that is common among adivasis. The inner bark of a sal tree is stripped and knotted, and carried by four couriers to four villages. Three knots mean that the event is to take place after three days. From each village other couriers are sent to more villages and so on. In this way news spreads with the speed of lightening.) Lately the tribals had learnt to speak up for themselves. Moti Babu isn't so stupid as to annoy them now.



Mangal's main anxiety was for Etoa. Alomani assured him, "We'll look after your grandson and your goats. We'll light your evening lamp every day. Why do you worry?"

"The boy will have to sleep alone."

"Aren't we there?"

Etoa did not utter a word as he accompanied them to town. Prahraj knew a lot of people. After admitting Mangal to hospital he spoke to the doctor and insisted that the X-ray be done the next day.

At night they slept in the house of Shankar Sing Munda, a peon in the Education Department. They had their meal at a roadside hotel. The

town people didn't serve enough rice. The helping was quite inadequate for Etoa.

The next day the X-ray showed that Mangal's leg had a compound fracture. The leg would need to be put in plaster for a month. The doctor couldn't say whether he would be fit to get back to work after that. He wasn't God after all, was he?

Mangal said, "I'll come back, Etoa. You'll go to school."

On their return journey Etoa was silent. School seemed like a dream. The branch of the mango hadn't only broken Mangal's leg, it had shattered Etoa's world. On the way Praharaj bought Etoa some sweets and a bit of mango jelly. They rode the bullock-cart back to the village.

* * *

Praharaj brought news from town that Mangal would have to stay in hospital another month. Old bones take longer to heal.

Now it was impossible not to fall into the hands of Moti Babu. Subal, Chand, Alomani, Bhairo all advised Etoa to accept Moti Babu's offer. They said, "Work for the time being. It's foolish to ignore his offer. We know that your grandfather wants you to go to school. Let him come back; you can go to school then."

Etoa grew up a lot in those few days. He knew they had only a small hut, a courtyard and a few goats. If he worked for Moti Babu, he would at least be able to live in his village, among the people he knew.

Moti Babu was pleased at his decision. "Now you're being smart. You see if God had meant you to be educated, your grandfather won't have had this accident."

Etoa didn't reply. After the day's work, he and Ratan tried to study, but couldn't remember much. Nor could he go to the club in the evening for who would have looked after the goats?

When school resumed, the teacher noticed his absence. The boys told

him what had happened. He said, "I must go and see him and find out how he is managing alone."

But Etoa avoided him. He was afraid he might start crying. He only cried when Mangal returned from hospital and slapped him hard. "It would have been better if I'd died. So you've become a cowherd again! I so wanted to save you from being an illiterate farmhand, a slave of the Babus. Why didn't you sell the jack fruit tree? Why didn't you sell the goats? Why didn't you go hungry till I returned? Why did you have to do this, Etoa?"

"Aba, the Babu wouldn't have waited. He would have employed someone else. And you know that you won't be able to work so hard now."

"Why not?"

"You have to walk with a stick. How can you do any hard work?"

Alomani said, "Be sensible Mangal Dada. Etoa will go to school some day. Things won't remain like this forever."

Mangal kept quiet but the next day he went and cut some date-palm leaves. Why should he sit idle? He would weave mats. An adivasi cannot stay at home doing nothing.

* * *

Etoa didn't go to school but he chose to go to the Babu's house at such a time that on the way he could listen to the school-master telling stories to the children. Etoa knew that the teacher had brought story-books from town. As he had promised earlier, he read out the tales of battles and wars.

Yes, there was a fierce battle once. Sometimes there were arrows on both sides, sometimes the arrows had to face cannon and guns.

Etoa also wanted to tell these stories to someone. He called out to the sky, the grass and the water and narrated these tales. He could see that



battles were being fought constantly, everywhere. Didn't the old rabbit have to fight to stay alive? At the sight of a shadow—be it of man or animal—he pricked up his ears and ran inside the reed forest. When Etoa cast his net in the water there was a regular battle in the world of fish, a scramble to stay out of its reach. Or look at the wild flowers. Every monsoon they had to hide under the red water of the Subarnarekha, and come out again when the water subsided. There were only battles and combat in life.

One day, the teacher caught hold of him. "Don't run away, Etoa. Tell me, why don't you come to school?"

"I have to work for Moti Babu."

"Do you know you'll get a stipend if you come to school? You'll also get a snack in the afternoon."

Etoa stood digging the dirt with his big toe. Then he gathered up courage and said, "You talk of a fierce battle every day. Is the battle over, or is it still going on?"

The teacher put his hand on Etoa's head and ruffled his hair. "There have been many battles, Etoa."

"Is it all over?"

"Why? Do you want to go and fight if there's a battle on?"

"I? I?... Listen, Sir, you cook your own food, don't you? If I bring you a large tuber root will you accept it? It's very tasty."

"Come to school first."

"Aba also wants me to go but he broke his leg. The Babu threatened to employ someone else. That is why... and besides there was no food at home."

"Do your friends have the same problems?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you come to the club in the evening?"

"I'm tired after the day's work."

Etoa shook his head and ran off. The school-teacher watched him as he went away. Etoa Munda, too, was a brave warrior. He was also fighting a battle, only he didn't know it.

Alomani brought drinking water for the school-teacher every day. The teacher told her, "The adivasi children don't come. The government will close down the school. How can it run without students?"

"Don't tell me these things, son, what do I know about them. My sons started life as cowherds and ended up being farm labourers. But when they celebrate Birsa Munda Day at the club, you tell them about school."

"Will everyone come to the club?"

"Yes. It's a meeting organized by the club. They'll have to come."

* * *

The next day, the teacher came out of the class-room and stopped Etoa as he was passing.

"Come here, Etoa. Look at this picture."

"Who is it?"

"Birsa Munda, Birsa Bhagwan. Have you heard of him?"

"Yes."

"Do you know anything about him?"

"No."

"Have you heard the names Sidhu and Kanhu?"

"Of course."

"Do you know about them?"

"No."

"Etoa, you like stories of battles, don't you? Birsa, Sidhu and Kanhu were all valiant fighters. They died fighting. If you had learnt to read, you could have read about them. Then your friends could also have got to know these stories."

Today Etoa crossed the river and went to the sandbank. There he danced and lifting his hands to the sky called out to the river, the reed forest and the flying birds, "Listen," he said, "it was a fierce battle and our people fought it. Do you know our Birsa and Sidhu, and our Kanhu. Do you hear?"

The waves of the Dulang river carried Etoa's words to the Subarnarekha. On the horizon the Rameshwar temple seemed to lean forward to hear them, and the striped grasshoppers hopped from flower to flower to relate Etoa's story.

* * *

"Aba, do you know about Birsa Bhagwan and Sidhu and Kanhu?"

"I know their names, but don't know their stories."

"What did Birsa Bhagwan do, Aba?"

"I don't know, child."

"Aba...I want to go to school."

"How? Why after so long?"

"You're much better now. I'll plant chillies in our yard after school and sell them in the weekly market. We'll sell the old goat and buy a new one. If the goat has kids think of the money we'll make."

"I always wanted you to go to school, Etoa—you gave it up. Let's see what the others say. Moreover, I've given my word to the Babu."

"You haven't put your thumb impression on blank paper?"

"No, but I promised that I'd work for him. An adivasi always keeps his word."

"But he would have employed someone else if I hadn't turned up. Don't Babus have to keep their word also?"

"All I know is we have to keep our word. They act according to their rules, we according to ours."

* * *



Birsa Day—15 November. The previous day Etoa informed Moti Babu that he wouldn't be able to come to work.

"Why?"

"Tomorrow is Birsa Day."

"So what? That comes every year."

"This year there'll be a large gathering. We'll have to decorate the club."

"Don't make me laugh, Etoa. You people have become too presumptuous. The times are bad so we have to keep quiet. But this is going too far! Birsa Day! A large gathering! Primitive barbarians like you have learnt words too big for your mouth!"

Etoa was livid with rage. But fear of Moti Babu was too deeply ingrained for him to be able to retort. He came home without uttering a word.

"Aba, are we primitive barbarians?"

"Who says so?"

"Moti Babu. Why should he say such a thing? Is it because we're uneducated, poor, dark-skinned

and live in mud huts?"

"So we're primitive barbarians, are we? Who'll do his work but for these barbarians?"

"I won't work for him any more."

"Come. Let's go to the river and wash these clothes with washing soda. We can wear torn clothes to the meeting tomorrow but we shouldn't wear dirty ones. And look at your hair—it looks like a crow's nest. Come, let me wash it."

The next morning Etoa was thrilled when he looked at the vast crowd, and heard the enthusiastic slogans, "Long live Birsa Munda! Long live Sidhu, Kanhu!" He was very pleased to see Ratan and Singrai also there.

"Did the Babu let you take the day off?"

"Who asked the Babu? We came because we wanted to."

"What a large crowd there is this year!"

"Do you know our teacher is the president?"

This year Mangal, Bhairo, Subal, Alomani and Bhajan were all seated on the stage. Praharaj was adjusting the mike. It was battery-operated. Never before had they made such elaborate arrangements.

"Silence! Silence!" Praharaj yelled into the mike.

"Our President, Gangaram Hembrom, will speak to you." Gangaram stood up. He was slightly built and his voice was rather soft, but today he looked imposing and sounded impressive.

"We have no pictures of our great heroes Sidhu and Kanhu which we could use to draw their portraits. But we do have of Birsa Bhagwan. I am holding it before you. Please stand and pay homage to him and I'll tell you his life-story which will inspire you with courage. You'll realize that you may be poor, but you've the strength to overcome all obstacles."

What a portrait it was! Painted with black charcoal on white paper

pasted on a bamboo mat. What a powerful face under the turban! The eyes like burning torches. Suddenly from the crowd, Etoa shouted: "Birsa Bhagwan! Birsa Bhagwan! He fought a fierce battle for us." The rest of the crowd took up the chant, "Hail Birsa Bhagwan! Hail Birsa Bhagwan!"

Etoa's small chest seemed to burst with pride. Primitive barbarians indeed! Do barbarians have a great hero like Birsa Munda? Etoa seemed to grow taller with happiness and joy. No, Etoa knew they weren't barbarians. Their lives couldn't be limited to being cowherds and field labourers. Etoa would study and find the answers to the questions that plagued him. Why did they live in mud huts? Why did Aba wear a tattered dhoti? He must know. His chest seemed to overflow as if the Dulang and the Subarnarekha were flooding his insides.

* * *

This was the end of Etoa's life as a cowherd. The leaders of the various tribal groups agreed to find a way to send their children to school. They had to fight to get an adivasi school sanctioned for their area. After a long struggle they got an adivasi teacher for this school. All these efforts would be wasted if the adivasi children didn't attend school.

Moti Babu was furious! "What, no cowherd will come to work! I'll show them!"

But his elder brother reasoned with him. "What will you do? We are only six families—there are hundreds of them. Plead and persuade them. The days of shouting are over."

So Moti Babu went to Mangal.

"What's happened, Mangal?"

"Why, Babu, what's happened?"

"Etoa's stopped coming to work. Didn't you know?"

"He won't come to work, Babu. He has to go to school. He'll get a stipend, and books, and tiffin. When he gets all this, why should he go to work?"

"All this reading and writing—what will it lead to? Will it make him a king or something?"

"No, Babu, it'll make him a man."

"This is a conspiracy. But listen well, Mangal, at the time of planting and harvesting I'm not going to employ any of you."

Mangal scratched his head and replied, "Will that be wise, Babu? We won't allow that. The winds have changed, Babu. The barbarians have united."

Moti Babu had to swallow his anger and go home quietly.

* * *

Today the school-master took the root tuber from Etoa. Why shouldn't he? Can't a teacher accept a small present from his student?



After school, Etoa ran across to the sandbanks of the river. He lay flat on his back and told the sky, "Do you know what a fierce battle it

was?" The river, the sky, the grass all sparkled and laughed in the sun. Foolish boy! Etoa Munda didn't know that his fierce battle was over and he had actually won the fight.

This is how Etoa's story ends.

